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ABSTRACT

The Soviet Union is attempting to deal with the sometimes conflicting problems of efficient vocationalization and provision of equal opportunity. From the first class of general school, Soviet children have several "labor" lessons a week. Main components of these lessons are practical skills, socialization for work, and vocational guidance. Education of all students is virtually the same until a choice, after the eighth class, of staying on at the general secondary school or going to a secondary vocational trade school (SPTU). Five categories of problems relating to vocational education have been highlighted: workers without necessary skills, dissatisfaction with the moral aspect of labor training, differing standards of training, low prestige of particular types of work, and unsatisfactory vocational guidance. The recent reform has addressed itself to such problems as emphasis on up-to-date labor knowledge and skills, simplification of school structure, increased enrollment in SPTUs, and simplification of ministerial control. Some problems are being attacked by attaching secondary schools to a base enterprise--a factory or farm in its local area--that will share the responsibility for labor training. Future problems are automation, the bureaucracy, shortage of agricultural labor, and raising the prestige of vocational education. (YLB)

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VOCATIONALISING EDUCATION CONFERENCE

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RECENT SOVIET VOCATIONALISATION POLICIES

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RECENT SOVIET VOCATIONALISATION POLICIES

Felicity O'Dell

1. Introduction

Vocationalisation has been an important element of Soviet education from the very beginning. The very first Soviet schools were faced with the problem of how to educate people with the necessary skills to rebuild the economy after the ravages of both the First World War and the Civil War. As well as training people in practical skills, Soviet schools had to engage in considerable social and moral education so that school-leavers had the discipline and the motivation to work hard for the Soviet cause.

An emphasis on the practical rather than the theoretical has, thus, from the start been at the centre of Soviet educational programmes. There has never been any question of practical work being only for the less academic children.

Throughout the Soviet period, there have been a number of educational reforms. Yet the problem of training for work has

remained central. Each reform has tried simply to improve on the ways in which people are prepared for work in Soviet society. The most recent Soviet educational reform, which was adopted in 1984, centres very explicitly on vocational training and on related practical and moral issues.

One question often raised by educational reformers since 1917 has been that of where training for work should take place. Should school children learn their practical skills on an actual farm or in a real factory? Should school-leavers get their training for their chosen specialism in a vocational school or on-the-job? Some argue that the youngster can only really learn how to work from experiencing work on the shopfloor, holding real tools and producing real goods. Others say that this hinders the work of factories and does not give young people the theoretical foundation they need for their training. At different times during the Soviet period the question of where to train has been answered differently. We shall see, later in this paper, how current Soviet thinking approaches this question.

The whole of Soviet ideology, however, is based on equality of opportunity for all regardless of sex, race or social background. Children must, therefore, not be separated for vocational training at too early at age nor must their choice of one type of training deprive them of the chance to transfer to another type later on.

Another significant factor to bear in mind when considering vocationalisation in the USSR is the fact that there is a

continuing demand for workers of most types. This may in part be due to an inefficient organisation of work but the fact remains that there is no shortage of jobs. As a result the problems faced by Soviet society and Soviet schools are fundamentally very different from those being faced by Western societies and schools at the moment.

In this paper we shall look at the ways in which the Soviet system attempts to deal with the sometimes conflicting problems of efficient vocationalisation and provision of equal opportunity. The particular problems which the recent reform has addressed itself to will be considered. Finally we shall look at remaining problems relating to the question of vocational education in the USSR.

2. Basic Structure of Soviet Vocational Training

The structure of Soviet vocational training as described below existed before the Reform and none of the basic points made below has been changed by the Reform.

Vocational training begins for the Soviet child from the very first day he or she enters a kindergarten or school. For all those involved in education, training for work is explicitly stated as one of the prime aims of the Soviet school system.

From the first class of the general school, the Soviet child has a couple of lessons a week which are called 'Trud' (Labour). These continue right through his or her school career and, like

all subjects in the Soviet curriculum, are compulsory for all children. Unlike other subjects in the Soviet curriculum, the syllabus is not throughout identical for all children. Much of the work done is related to the particular economic needs of the area where the school is situated.

There are three main components of the labour lessons:

a) practical skills

b) socialisation for work

c) vocational guidance.

Let us look at each of these in a little more detail.

The practical skills a child is taught enable him or her to do work with the hands, to hold and use tools, to operate machinery. Obviously what is taught increases in complexity with the children's age. Exactly what kind of tools and machinery the child learns to work with varies, particularly as the child gets older. While all children - boys and girls - should learn the basics of woodwork and metalwork, older children may specialise according to their own interests or the facilities available in their area.

As the children get older, they frequently go outside the school for their labour lessons. They may go to a study workshop set up at a local factory or they may go to an 'inter-school production combine', a large building used by all the schools in the area and incorporating workshops of a range of different types. An important part of the practical skills training received by schoolchildren is a month's practical work which all children

have to do in the ninth year of the secondary school. In this month children engage in full-time work on production or on the farm. This gives all children some taste of what working life is like and it is felt to have considerable moral as well as practical benefits.

The socialisation side of labour lessons is considered to be of no less importance than the practical side. There are two main strands to this part of the programme. Firstly, pupils are trained in what are felt to be the correct Soviet attitudes towards work. They are, for example, encouraged to see their own personal fulfilment as being through work; they are trained to respect their own work and that of other people; they are told to see all jobs as being equal while at the same time being encouraged to study hard so as to be able to contribute more to the working life of the Motherland. Secondly, pupils are trained in habits and attitudes which will help them to be efficient Soviet workers in the future. They are encouraged, for example, to be disciplined and to work as part of a team.

The third component of the labour lesson relates to vocational guidance. This is different in nature from vocational guidance in the West. As here, it is concerned with pupils choosing jobs. In the West, the aim, however, is to analyse the interests and abilities of the child in question and then to select a job which seems to fit that individual. In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, the starting-point is an analysis of the jobs where workers are required. The role of vocational guidance is then to guide school-children into those jobs where they are most needed. This

it's often a matter of encouraging children to join industries local to their area. Much of the vocational guidance programme in the school centres around talks and visits organised by local parents and workers.

The three elements of the labour lesson that we have considered above are reinforced in other lessons given in the Soviet school. Science lessons, for example, stress practical applications of any theoretical points taught. History lessons deal with working conditions and emphasise the importance of workers' movements. Geography lessons devote far more time to economic geography than to physical geography. The reading syllabus includes, for instance, many poems extolling the joys of work.

Similarly, the extra-curricular activities provided for the Soviet child include many that have a direct relevance to work. There are places where children can get additional work skills. There are clubs for 'Young Technicians', for instance, where children can go for advice, materials and equipment to help them with their technical interests. In certain places there are Children's Railways where children staff and organise a particular railway line. Similarly, the socialisation aspect of the work of the school is backed up outside the school. The youth movement (both at Octobrist and Pioneer levels) reinforces the attitudes towards work taught in the school. Similarly, the view of work presented in the children's media does not in any way clash with that put across in the school.

The education of all Soviet children is, with minor exceptions,

identical until the end of the eighth class. School is compulsory until the end of the tenth class. After the eighth class, there are two possibilities.

1) The pupil may stay on at the general secondary school. After this, he or she may

a) do a course in a PTU (a vocational trade school),

b) go on to higher education

or

c) go straight to work, receiving training for this on-the-job.

2) The pupil may leave school and go to an SPTU (a secondary vocational trade school). In this school pupils not only complete their secondary schooling, following the same syllabus as that used in the general secondary school but also get a qualification in a particular trade.

Throughout the seventies the trend has been to discourage pupils from going straight to work without any kind of institutionalised job training. More and more PTUs of different kinds have been constructed and larger numbers of young workers are receiving their initial job training in them. Institutionalised job training is favoured for a number of reasons, the main one being the nature of the scientific-technical revolution. It is felt that it is not enough for people today just to learn the specific skills necessary for one particular job. Job requirements are changing so fast that workers need to be very flexible. Most people will, it is felt, have several different specialisms in the course of their working lives. The vocational trade schools

can make this easier both for industry and for future workers by giving basic theoretical technical courses which will help workers to adapt to changing conditions in the future.

Among vocational schools, SPTUs (those offering both the final two years of a secondary schooling and a practical qualification) have an especial significance. One reason for the importance of SPTUs is the fact that specialist job training is begun at fifteen, a relatively early age. However, general schooling is carried on at the same time so that paths to higher education are not, theoretically, blocked off for children who opt to get a practical qualification at the earliest opportunity.

The provision of alternative routes to higher education is an important factor in Soviet education. Universities and other higher educational institutions have evening and correspondence departments which have almost as many students as the day departments and these are of particular benefit to people who started working straight after school or vocational school. For those who have been away from study for a long time, preparatory departments have been set up at a number of higher educational institutions. These retrain people in study habits for a year before they start a full higher education course. Workplaces are encouraged to support their workers who wish to follow a belated course of higher education. In a number of ways, then, the Soviet educational system has provision for helping people who decide to return to higher study after having worked. These provisions are the major way whereby equality of opportunity is seen to be encouraged by the Soviet educational system.

Having looked above at the basic structure of vocational training in the Soviet Union, let us now turn our attention to certain problems within that system which have been highlighted by the Soviet press. As was pointed out above, vocational training can be seen as the pivot of the current Soviet education reform. What are the problems which Soviet vocational education must urgently address itself to? Most of the measures proposed by the Reform are aimed primarily at producing more efficient workers for the future; some of the measures focus on the socialisation aspects of training for work and some deal with the more practical skills felt to be required by the socialist society of the future.

3. Problems in Vocational Education.

What are felt to be the particular problems of the Soviet society of the future? In a speech last year Gorbachev said that the Soviet Union is currently going through a critical period. He referred to the need to make a step forward to the intensification of production. Intensification, he said, is as revolutionary and as all-consuming a process for the present day as industrialisation was in the past. Of prime importance in the move for intensification is the preparation of workers, a preparation which begins in the schools and is carried further by the PTUs and the higher educational institutions (1). A recent article in Izvestiya neatly sums up the significance of the schools when it states that what is done in the kindergarten sandpit today will have its effect on the factory shopfloor in

the future (2). It is perhaps significant that the new Minister of Education who took office in 1985 is an engineer by training.

In the last few years the Soviet press has highlighted a number of problems relating to the training of citizens for work. These criticisms fall into five main categories. Firstly, the training given frequently does not produce the kind of workers desired in that they do not have the creativity or the knowledge of modern technology necessary for maximising production in a modern society.

Secondly, the moral aspect of labour training is also not always satisfactory as many workers do not have the committed attitudes to their work that the authorities would like. It has been felt for some time that the best way to train workers who are not only creative and knowledgeable but also committed is through institutional training rather than totally at the factory or on the farm.

Training vocational skills in PTUs has also given rise to a third set of problems, however. Since the early seventies an increasing number of PTUs and SPTUs has been set up but the prestige of these is still not as high as is wished. Part of the problem here results from the large number of ministries which have been involved in vocational education and from the differing standards of the courses which they provide. It is felt, moreover, that the level of academic education given by many PTUs is lower than that given by general secondary schools. The extent to which courses actually give students practical experience under realistic

conditions also varies and is not always adequate.

Fourthly, the prestige of particular types of work, most notably agricultural labour, is not high. This is increasingly viewed with concern by the Soviet press as the performance of Soviet agriculture is becoming disturbingly unsatisfactory.

A final area which has regularly undergone criticism in the Soviet press is vocational guidance work. This has been frequently criticised for being both qualitatively and quantitatively unsatisfactory.

The problems outlined above are those which one would have expected the reform to try to solve (3). To what extent and in what ways has it done so? How far can it expect to be successul in acheiving its aims? The next section of this paper will attempt to answer these questions.

4. The Reform.

A fundamental principle of the reform is that young people should receive their basic labour training from professional instructors in schools or colleges rather than from older workers directly on-the-job. The trend of the seventies is thus continued.

It is re-emphasised in the reform that labour training is not mere instruction in practical skills; it is perhaps even more importantly the inculcation of the desired attitudes towards both work and society. Official articles on the reform deal with this before they go on to describe more practical aspects of the proposals. Thus it is stated that each young worker of the future must be a patriot, an internationalist, a collectivist and he or she must uphold high standards both at work and in everyday life.

The need to provide young people with up-to-date labour knowledge and skills is emphasised. Creativity in work and the ability to make use of the new technology are now seen as vital characteristics of the future worker. The central press has recently pointed out that it is not enough today to know the three Rs, it is also necessary to be familiar with electronics (4).

There is to be some re-organisation of the structure of schools and colleges providing labour training. The trend is towards simplification. PTUs are evetually to be all of one type - they

are all to become colleges which give both the last two years of a general secondary education and a vocational training. These SPTUs will in addition have courses for those who have already completed their secondary schooling as well as for those who have not. They will also have courses for the re-training of older workers. Day, evening and correspondence students may all be catered for by the Secondary PTU.

The number of pupils who leave the general secondary school after the eighth class to attend a Secondary PTU is to be increased. It is felt that the current intake should eventually be doubled. There is, thus, to be a trend away from the earlier Soviet pattern of extending the length of primarily academic education for all.

Secondary PTUs are to be established at any enterprise where there are more than 2000 workers. To train workers for enterprises with fewer personnel, colleges will co-ordinate the needs of enterprises in the same branch of industry. In rural areas they are to be in each administrative region.

Ministerial control is also to be simplified. At present PTUs are under the aegis of a range of ministries. Over the period 1984 to 1988 all ministries involved are expected to pass over control of their vocational colleges to the State Committee on Vocational and Technical Education. The aim is more efficient coordination of the needs of society for particular types of workers with the vocational courses provided and with the student intakes allowed. It is hoped to systematise the content and attestation of

courses.

Over the previous year the State Committee on Vocational and Technical Education together with the education ministries was to prepare a list of the jobs for which Secondary PTUs should provide courses. In cooperation with the industrial ministries involved, the State Committee will then work until 1987 on drawing up suitable curricula and syllabi for vocational courses.

General secondary education is recognised as having an important role to play in the overall process of labour training. To this end teaching of science subjects is to be improved and their practical relevance is to be emphasised. Optional and extra-curricular activities with a practical application are to be encouraged. Vocational guidance work with pupils is to be improved.

One way in which it is hoped that some of these problems may be resolved is by attaching secondary schools to a base enterprise. This means that each school has very close links with either a factory or farm in its local area. These enterprises share with the school the responsibility for labour training.

Where exactly do the responsibilities of the base enterprise lie? The reform re-emphasises that labour training tasks for the first to the seventh classes are concerned with general labour skills of a polytechnical character. From the eighth class on they concentrate on preparation for the mass work specialisms. Training may be carried out in school, on production or at

inter-school production combines. It is now, however, the responsibility of the base enterprise, no matter where training takes place, to keep equipment used for training up-to-date and in good repair, to provide specialist clothing and, most importantly, to enlist experienced workers as tutors. The enterprise also pays for work done and assesses children's skills.

Although most practical training is to be based in schools or colleges, the need for pupils to learn production skills in a real environment is acknowledged and so base enterprises are to give pupils real tasks to complete under the guidance of experienced workers and tutors. Special training workshops are to be set up at base enterprises so that youngsters can do some of their work practice there. Enterprise administrators must take responsibility for the level of production training that goes on within their place of work.

Pupils gaining work experience at an enterprise do not count as workers as far as the firm is concerned but they must be paid at least half of what their work earns them. Base enterprises must also help to finance buildings and equipment required by their SPTU.

What are the responsibilities of the school towards its base enterprise? The school has not only to organise the pedagogical side of vocational training but also to further the comfort and attractiveness of the base enterprise; it organises concerts, provides pot plants, paints rest areas and helps with pre-school

facilities, for example. The involvement of the pupils in many of these tasks is felt not only to be of benefit to the base enterprise but also to have an important socialising role for the children themselves (5).

Particular importance is to be given to the development of agricultural SPTUs. As one measure to improve the standards and prestige of such colleges, teachers are to be given material incentives to take up jobs in rural colleges. Graduates from these colleges may be given an allowance to help them set up a home if they decide to work on the land in their specialism. If they leave within a short time they will have to return the money.

The need to improve the calibre of teachers is not ignored. Increases in pay for teachers and all workers involved in education are being introduced to encourage people to go into this profession. (6) Incentives and training are to be given in particular to experienced workers who decide to become instructors in schools or colleges.

All organisations which have any connection with vocational training are called on to play their part in improving the system. The Academy of Pedagogical Sciences is to do research into problems of vocational instruction. Trade unions are to help with proposals. The Komsomol is to be involved in work carried out in the schools and base enterprises. The Party is to pay attention to raising the prestige of vocational training as well as to general party work within the SPTUs.

The State Committee on Vocational and Technical Education is to work out a system of control over the work carried out by the colleges and the base enterprises. Facilities, training and administration are to be regularly checked and improved.

The aims of the 1984 Education Reform have been re-emphasised by the 27th Party Congress held in February 1986. They are quoted below as a summary of what is felt to be of major importance by the Soviet authorities. The aims of current education policies are stated by the CPSU as being as follows:

to raise the quality both of teaching and of ideological, political, work, moral and aesthetic education

to improve the quality of the preparation of young people for socially useful labour

to improve the training and retraining of specialists

to further the implementation of measures planned in the 1984 educational reform

to create the necessary conditions for the effective labour training of secondary school pupils with the aim that each school leaver from the general school has a mastery of one of the mass professions

to improve the work being done with relation to the vocational guidance of youth

to develop the system of vocational education

to improve the practical training received by young workers when on production

to develop and improve the apprentice system whereby each trainee is attached to an experienced worker

to strengthen the material basis of the school and all of educational institutions

to make sure that all workrooms and labs are supplied with modern equipment, tools and textbooks

to improve the quality of teaching with particular reference to electronics

to build in the next five years general secondary schools with a total of seven million places and vocational schools with a total of no less than 810,000 places.(7)

These Party Congress resolutions do not modify in any way the education Reform. They simply serve to summarise its aims. As all the measures proposed by the Reform show, the proposals relating to vocational education are extremely thorough. They aim, firstly, to extend the network of institutional vocational education and, secondly, to improve its standards and prestige by simplification of its structure and by coordination of its programmes and aims.

5. Problems of the Future?

Certain of the areas of the reform mentioned above seem bound to give rise to difficulties. The first of these is perhaps the question of automation. Automation is being encouraged at the factory; it is said that it can already double or treble productivity. It is also felt that automation can encourage creativity among the work force. In the last five year plan more than a hundred models of robot were produced and thousands of these are already in use in factories (8).

In a recent speech Gorbachev has again stressed the importance of a transformation of the economy, emphasising the need for automatisation, computerisation and robotisation. He said that by the year 2000 the amount of manual work being done would decrease by 15 to 20 per cent. In connection with this he noted a need to have a constant system of education, enabling pupils and workers at all ages and levels to train and retrain to fit the ever-changing technical needs of modern society. The contemporary education reform is just one step towards this end but it cannot do everything that will be necessary. (9)

Familiarisation with electronics is being verbally encouraged for young people. Schools are urged to start introducing children to computers - through games - at the earliest possible age. Even home computers are essential in today's world, writes Literaturnaya gazeta. Both the schoolchild and the minister must have access to one in the future. They are invaluable for the future engineer, draughtsman and journalist. From an early school level micro-computers can both amuse and instruct. Simulation games can give the child an impression of what it's like to drive a car or a plane, for example. Working with a computer, it is claimed, can help the child to understand how his or her own mind works and can train pupils to do their own work in a more systematic, and therefore, creative way (10). Recent exhibitions in the Soviet Union of Western computer technology bear witness to this interest as does the purchase about a year ago of a small number of BBC B nicro-computers.

Yet the central press criticises the Ministry of Education for not paying enough attention to the practical aspects of this; the computer, 'Shkol'nitsa', which will be usable with schoolchildren of all ages, is still only in an experimental form. Software is said to lag even further behind hardware in its development. Not only general secondary schools but also PTUs are in no way prepared for tomorrow's automation, more specifically for the predicted boom in industrial robots. At the level of higher education too specialists are said to be trained using out-of-date equipment. As a result specialists at all levels are felt to have a fear of tomorrow's machines; their earlier training is felt to be a hindrance rather than a help in coming to terms with the new technology. When it happens, retraining is so slow that many are afraid that the new equipment which is coming into the factories will never in the end be properly used (11).

The problem of automation is one that is unlikely to be solved quickly in the Soviet Union. The reasons for problems in this area are not hard to find in that there seems to be a certain conflict of interests here between what is economically and what is politically desirable. Literaturnaya gazeta is right to say that computers are invaluable for journalists but the ease of writing enabled by word processors has implications that are more likely to excite the producers of samizdat than the political authorities. Similarly, the true - and fictional - stories which have circulated in the West of schoolchildren finding their way into police and military files will certainly have encouraged the political authoroties to view home computers with a certain

apprehension.

Another basic problem which the reform seems unlikely to solve fully is the bureaucratic one. Large organisations - and the USSR par excellence - seem to tend towards an excess of paperwork and ill-thought-out controls. The advantages of the simplification of the system of vocational training are clear but the resulting centralisation of control is not likely to rid the system of bureaucratic problems.

There are already press reports of young and talented teachers who leave their jobs because all the paperwork they have to do does not allow them the freedom to teach in the way that they would like to (12). Izvestiya similarly reports how a parent was invited to contribute a session about his job for a school evening activity. He wanted to accept but requested that he could do it the following week because he felt he needed more time to prepare adequately. The school told him that that would be no good because it was just that one particular week that the theme was vocational guidance and that next week they would have a different topic! (13).

Other examples concern formal inspections of educational institutions; specialist lecturers complain that their work is constantly being inspected by people who know nothing of their field (14). The school factory, Chaika, in Moscow is famous in that it is organised and staffed almost completely by schoolchildren. It makes a profit of millions of roubles but the director of the factory is said to spend almost all of his time

undergoing either pedagogical or economic inspections (15).

Nervousness about taking responsibility for original decisions is also a feature of large bureaucracies and this has resulted in, for example, the director of an experimental school in Novosibirsk losing his job three times for being innovative in the spirit of the reform but in an original way (16). He has similarly been repeatedly re-instated but at undoubted cost.

Centralised regulations lead to abuse in all sorts of areas. Optional courses are set up at schools because the Ministry says they are necessary but the courses are not always based on the interests of the children or the needs of the local economy so much as on what the teachers can already do without any extra preparation. Thus teachers use the optional programme to get some overtime payment for themselves rather than to find specialist workers from outside the school who could give the pupils a worthwhile course (17).

The agricultural problem is unlikely to be solved quickly. In recent articles in the central press, the problem of finding enough people to work on farms is often blamed on the fact that, when the fashion in the USSR was for having everything large size, then it wasn't considered practical to keep a full secondary school in every village. Older children were sent away to boarding schools in local towns. Having once left the village, those children are unlikely to return. It is now stated that it is necessary to build full secondary schools for children to attend without leaving home - even if these schools have

relatively few pupils. An eloquent statement of this problem can be found in an article called 'Who will milk the cows tomorrow?' (18) It indeed seems likely that a large-scale school building programme for rural areas may be necessary for the solution of the difficult problem of finding adequate agricultural workers. This is as yet beyond the scope of the reform.

The organisation of vocational training always seems to bring problems. If youngsters are trained in schools or colleges, they may learn a lot of theory but do not know how to hold a tool properly when they eventually come to work. If they do their training on-the-job they may at first hinder the work of the enterprise. Once they have picked up the necessary skills, they may be used by the workplace administration as a means of cheap labour. The dificulties here are certainly not confined to the Soviet Union but they have not been fully solved by earlier Soviet educational reforms.

The question of raising the prestige of vocational schools is also a difficult one. An increased prestige has happened to some degree in the past through the improvement and extension of PTU facilities and opportunities. There has not, however, been much success in making vocational schools attractive to the children of the intelligentsia rather than to those of a working calss or agricultural background. If the Soviet Union finds itself able to provide vocational training in SPTUs together with an academic education that is not inferior to that given in the general secondary school, then it will be able to serve well the interests of both the state and the individual. Under such

circumstances perhaps the children of the intelligentsia may not then feel that going to an SPTU is an unsatisfactory move as compared with staying on the general secondary school. For this to happen, however, some fairly dramatic changes of attitude are required.

Will the Soviet educational planners succeed with their reforms. The problems that have been outlined above seem unlikely to disappear very soon. Yet there are certain very positive aspects of the new reform here. The experience of the Izhorsky factory in Kolpino is but one example of a positive report in the Soviet press. The school and the SPTU attached to it have agreements with the factory about what each will do to help the other. These have been found to be very productive from the point of view of both the factory and the school or SPTU (19).

The close links which the reform seeks to establish between the SPTU and the base enterprise together with their shared responsibility for vocational training would sugggest that they may be able to work out a theory/practice balance that is in the interests of both industry and education. It will be interesting to see what the following years will bring.

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